

Remembering My Professor and My Friend: David Williams II

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In rare moments in your life, you will come across someone who seems too good to be true. They have so much education and pedigree, but they are still simple, everyday people who you can talk to. They have the respect of executives, college presidents, and boards of directors, but yet they know the names of the hourly staff in the building. They could flex about all they know and who they know, but yet they choose to simply be helpful to you in your time of need (without arrogance or any expectation of anything in return).

My friend and my professor, David Williams, was one of those people. I first met him in the fall of 1990 as a first-year law student at The Ohio State University College of Law. His physical presence was undeniable—he had a walk and a swag that was different from the others; the clothes that he wore were the most stylish in the school; he had the gift of the tongue—as he was smooth and could persuade you like none other. He also exhibited an uncanny balance between cultural comfortability, political savviness, and academic excellence that I had never witnessed before. As a result, I wanted to know more about him; I wanted to be more like him. I was seeing the type of man that I wanted to become, so I watched, I listened, I emulated.

A pivotal phrase that I believe in is “They Will Be What They Can See,” which implies that people will encounter a number of people who represent first experiences for them. Professor Williams represented a number of FIRSTs in my life. He was the:

- FIRST African American male teacher or professor that I had;
- FIRST African American male who I knew with multiple degrees, including an M.B.A., a law degree, and an advanced law degree in tax;
- FIRST African American male to be selected as an Athletic Director of an SEC university;
- FIRST tax professor to have swag and the ability to make it fun, exciting, and applicable;
- FIRST image of what a successful African American male attorney looks like (now I could actually believe that I could be because of the “larger than life” physical example that he was).

Professor Williams was an ambassador for Diversity and Inclusion/Equity and Fairness. He was a trailblazer in many areas and created opportunities for others (athletically, academically, and career-wise) for over forty years. He filled his classrooms with wisdom, commitment to academic excellence, racial

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consciousness, political savviness, and a love for young people and young minds. He was special. He was one of my favorite professors. He was one of the two law school professors (he and Professor Vincene Verdun) who personally invested in me, validated me, encouraged me, and made sure that I knew that I had the talent, the ability and the passion to be a thriving corporate attorney. Twenty-five years later, his vision for me still holds true.

KEY MEMORY #1 – 1ST SEMESTER EXAMS

My first critical interaction with Professor Williams is likely the most important interaction that I ever had with him. It was the week before Thanksgiving in 1990 (my first year of law school). Many of my first year Black Law Student Association (BLSA) members and I were nervous and scared about the upcoming finals. We knew that how well we did on these exams would determine our three-year cumulative grade point average, our internship opportunities, and potentially the trajectory of our careers. To say that we were stressed is a material understatement.

None of us had taken a law school exam before. We did not have sample exams to use as a point of reference. The professors had not sat down and walked us through what they wanted or what constitutes an “A” versus a “C.” Since Professor Williams was the BLSA Faculty Advisor, he called an emergency meeting of the 1st-Year BLSA students, and he asked us this simple question:

In the real world, what do we call it when you have a client with as many complicated issues as we create, that has as many counter-challenging facts as we provide, and you file a complaint or brief with the courts within three hours of you having your first client meeting?

Student after student gave suggestions but much to no avail—no one had any right answers. When we finally gave up, Professor Williams (in his smooth, calming voice) said, “In the real world, we simply call this behavior MALPRACTICE.”

I have never forgotten this experience or these words because he validated each of us as law students in that moment. He gave me hope that I was ready and that I would ultimately become a successful attorney. He then went on to explain that no one memorizes cases and black letter law in the real world (“that’s why we have books and libraries”). He also made it clear that a law school pedigree does not win court cases; being on law journal does not win court cases; being in the top ten percent of your class does not win court cases. In the real world, he said, the only 1:1 direct correlation to winning a court case is which attorney is willing to work the hardest; who is willing to research that extra issue when everyone else is willing to quit; who is willing to spend the extra time looking for a creative solution for his/her client rather than simply making excuses based on the budgeted number of hours for business and time-management purposes. So, on this day, Professor Williams helped me realize that my effort and my willingness to never quit would be what would enable me

to be the best attorney that I aspired to be (not my first semester grades, not my hometown, not my financial upbringing).

KEY MEMORY #2 – RACIAL STATEMENTS PAINTED ON THE WALL

In the following year, Professor Williams was at the center of a racial “revelation” moment that forever changed how I thought about evaluating and addressing racial matters. On the Monday after Thanksgiving, I returned early in the morning to The Ohio State University College of Law and noticed that someone had spray painted all along the second-floor wall, “Go Back to Africa You Niggers.” I was physically shaking from the anger and frustration. I was emotionally hurt because I had convinced myself that 1991 was a post-racial era (at least within the law school, where we were intellectuals and above all of this ignorance and foolishness). Unfortunately, on this day, we realized that this was now our reality. As the Vice President of BLSA, I had to do something about this (as my emotions would not allow me to keep still).

So I went to Professor Williams and told him that I was calling an emergency meeting of the BLSA students to discuss the issue. For nearly forty-five minutes Professor Williams patiently listened to student after student speaking about their fears, their emotional frustrations, their disappointments, and ultimate rants about what should the administration do. What were we going to demand? What were our requirements? We were ready for a sit-in and other types of demonstrations, if necessary, to force the Dean to do the right thing.

Then Professor Williams brought calmness, strategy, and perspective into the room. He first asked a question: Do you think that the timing of this was random or strategic? Why did they choose this week, this day? He explained to us that the “intent” of the perpetrator was to wreak emotional fear and havoc in us and to “get us off of our game.” It was 100% strategic that it was done two weeks before finals. So he instructed us to “quit playing checkers and begin to play chess,” to “quit being tactical and be strategic,” and to “keep our eyes on the prize.” Then he made it plain to all of us. He said the perpetrator wants you to spend the next two weeks worrying about some spray paint (which independently has no power) rather than studying. And if you are not prepared for finals and get grades that are not becoming of your genius, then you would have allowed the perpetrator to win the war. The war is about your academic excellence. The war is about you getting great summer internship opportunities. The war is about your impacting the world through your legal minds and legal strategies. So go back to studying and let me do what I do.

Ever since that day, I have chosen to “up my game” and play chess; to focus on the strategic priorities of my opponent (whether on an M&A transaction, on a public policy debate, or simply in life). Ever since that day I have chosen to “major in the majors” and not sweat the small stuff. I learned that I have to think differently. I have to strategize differently. I have to choose differently. All because I know better now—because of Professor Williams.

PERSONAL STORY – SYDNEY AND HER PERSONAL TOUR OF VANDERBILT
UNIVERSITY

The full essence of Professor Williams can be summed up in his honest and sincere love for people. His desire to counsel them to make them better informed; to equip them with better knowledge; to produce better results. He simply wanted to utilize his time, talent, knowledge, education, credibility, relationships, and experience to benefit someone else, especially athletes, especially young people, and certainly young students of color.

This passion for young people is why Professor Williams served as the Faculty Advisor for our BLSA chapter. It is why Professor Williams strategized with me and equipped me for “the fight” when I got called into a meeting before the Dean and his leadership team. It is why he remained in the room with me as I debated with six administrators who I knew were my academic superiors but yet I felt safe. Professor Williams was in the house, and I knew that he had my back.

However, the most telling moment for me of how Professor Williams loved young people and was a never-ending supporter of diversity and inclusion came in November 2018. My daughter, Sydney, was a senior in high school and had narrowed her final two college choices to The Ohio State University and Vanderbilt University. While we were in Nashville, I called Professor Williams to let him know that we were in town, that we were visiting the campus and just wanted to say hello; but he was not having it. He cancelled his meetings the next day, had us meet him at the Vanderbilt University Sports Complex, and gave the two of us a personal tour of the Vanderbilt Campus—telling us about the growth of the campus in academic research and relevance; telling us about the new academic buildings and dorms being built on campus; and spending most of his time and energy on how proud he was of the journey of the University in its recruitment and retention of students of colors throughout the United States and internationally. Four hours later, after my daughter got an impromptu, personal campus tour from the Vanderbilt Athletic Director, he looked her dead in the eye and said, “Because of my relationship with your Daddy, I am committed to doing everything within my power to ensure that you have a successful experience while you are here at Vanderbilt University.” As a father, my heart was at peace because I knew, even though I was six hours away, my child was in safe hands. All this grace, mercy, and favor being shown by Professor Williams for the daughter of a student who he had in tax class twenty-seven years earlier. Today, she is a thriving pre-med student at Vanderbilt, continuing on his legacy of academic excellence for students that he believed in. Relationships mattered to him.

All of these stories represent the man, the teacher, the advisor, the advocate, and the leader that I knew, respected, and loved. He was the intellectual. He was the strategist. He was the calm throughout the storm. He was the voice for fairness and equity. He was the voice for excellence. He was the voice for The Ohio State University. He was the voice for Vanderbilt University. He was the

voice for love and family. Ultimately, he was the voice that family members, friends, co-workers, athletes, and students will continue to miss, because there are none like him.

The final words that I would like to say to you, Professor Williams, can be found in Matthew 25:21: “Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things and I have put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your Master.”

It has been a privilege to learn and study at your feet, to seek you for wise counsel, and watch you in your brilliance!! The Ohio State University College of Law, Vanderbilt University, and thousands of people throughout the world are better simply because of the man that you chose to be and the example that you were. You walked the walk. You talked the talk. And we respected you because of that. Thank you, thank you for sharing your love and kindness with each of us, one person, one experience, one opportunity at a time! You were simply the best that has ever come along!!